

Military Socialization: A Motivating Factor for Seeking Treatment in a Veterans' Treatment Court

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Abstract The veterans' treatment court movement is just beyond the nascent period, and given the rapid proliferation of these courts in recent years it is imperative that the scientific community understand their operational procedures and assess whether they are meeting a unique need beyond those addressed by other problem-solving courts. This paper provides an in-depth examination of veteran culture and how it helps to distinguish veterans' treatment courts from other courts that focus on similar populations (e.g., drug, DWI, and mental health courts). Using in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group data collected from veteran participants, veteran mentors, and court team members in Pennsylvania, we employ content analysis to explore the veteran culture as a motivator for participants to enroll in a veterans' treatment court and engage with others throughout participation in treatment. The results of this exploratory study suggest that a shared culture serves to motivate justice-involved veterans to seek out the veterans' treatment court over other treatment options and remain engaged in this problem-solving court, while inspiring a sense of obligation to do well in treatment for them and their fellow veterans. The shared experiences of military service and across-the-board support for fellow service members suggest that the veterans' treatment court creates a unique environment for pursuing treatment.

Keywords Treatment motivation · Veterans' treatment courts · Problem-solving courts · Justice-involved veterans

Much media attention has focused on the negative effects of current military conflicts upon military service members. For many veterans, deployments entail damaging physical and psychological consequences, including anxiety, depression, and post-

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traumatic stress (Britton et al., 2012; Kaplan et al., 2012; Tanielian et al., 2008; Tsai et al., 2013), substance use or dependence (Burnett-Zeigler et al., 2011; Eisen et al., 2012; Jacobson et al., 2008), traumatic brain injury and other wounds (Belanger et al., 2011; Silver et al., 2009), and homelessness (Tsai & Rosenheck, 2015). These problems are not isolated to veterans of the modern era; veterans from pre-9/11 conflicts remain at risk for psychosocial health problems even decades after their period of service (Bouffard, 2014; Tsai et al., 2013; Wright et al., 2005). The concurrence of these psychosocial problems and their associated cumulative disadvantages place some veterans at risk for becoming involved in the criminal justice system (Blodgett et al., 2013; White et al., 2012). Recent estimates suggest that over 700,000 veterans are in the corrections system (McCaffrey, 2013). Veterans as a group comprise approximately 9 % of the inmate population (Greenberg & Rosenheck, 2008), with more than 5000 veterans of recent conflicts serving time in state and federal prisons (Noonan & Mumola, 2007).

To address the psychosocial and treatment needs of justice-involved veterans, veterans' treatment courts (VTCs) have emerged as an alternative to traditional criminal processing. These courts build on the successes experienced by other problem-solving courts, and operationally they often are a hybrid between drug, DWI, and mental health courts. It is believed that VTCs provide treatment support in an environment tailored to the unique cultural needs of veterans (Ahlin et al., 2015). The veteran culture is embedded in the military experience. The military is a "total institution" (e.g., Goffman, 1961) and the chain of command is paramount (Sun et al., 2007). During boot camp for enlisted personnel and officer candidate school for officers, every aspect of their lives is controlled through authoritarian rule. They are told when to eat, sleep, walk, run, and use the bathroom (see e.g., U.S. Army, 2015), while also enduring physically grueling and psychologically exhausting training. Orders are mandatory, and failure to follow a directive leads to sanctions ranging from mild forms of non-judicial process to fines and imprisonment. Despite the rigor, military service is appealing to some and the desire to enlist has been linked to some personality traits (see Jackson et al., 2012); though part of the allure of military life may lie in the culture that the armed forces consciously promote and intentionally indoctrinate into their service personnel at every rank. The common socialization experienced by service members conditions them to honor the service over themselves and produces a military culture. While VTCs embrace this culture, its role is not well understood.

There has been a recent surge in the development of VTCs across the United States. Over the past five years, the number of VTCs has grown substantially to more than 200, and it is expected that an additional 150 courts will come on line by the end of 2016 (Clark, 2015). Like the problem-solving court movement in general, their rapid proliferation may be grounded in ideology rather than evidence (see Murphy, 2012). While research on VTCs exists, it is primarily limited to white papers (e.g., McGuire et al., 2013; Russell, 2009), single site outcome evaluations (e.g., Knudsen & Wingenfeld, 2015; Slattey et al., 2013), and some national survey data on VTC structure (see Baldwin, 2013). So far, very little attention has been paid to the role of motivation among VTC participants. VTCs, like other problem-solving courts, are premised on the use of legal coercion to motivate offenders to participate in treatment. In many VTCs, the court gives offenders the option to enroll in court supervised treatment in lieu of incarceration. If they do well in the program, they avoid jail or

prison, and their records are cleared. While this legal incentive to engage in treatment in order to avoid incarceration or a criminal record is believed to be coercive (Klag et al., 2005; Miller & Flaherty, 2000), is also viewed as a way to galvanize offenders into court supervised treatment and away from incarcerative sentences. Legal coercion has been identified as a strong motivator for treatment enrollment, retention, and completion (Perron & Bright, 2008; Young & Belenko, 2002), though its effectiveness is inconclusive (see Anglin, Brecht and Maddahian, 1989; Brecht et al., 1993; Burke & Gregoire, 2007).

Among veterans, we believe there may be other motivating factors that contribute to their desire to seek treatment and comply with treatment programs in a problem-solving court. Motivation is a continuum, ranging from external to internal sources of persuasion – with the possibility of having multiple motivators on the spectrum (Klag et al., 2005; Storbjörk, 2006). External motivators for seeking treatment include social pressures that are formal (e.g., employer) and informal (e.g., family and friends) (Klag et al., 2005; Wild et al., 2002), and these formal and informal motivators often include the presence of a strong social support system (Bahr et al., 2010; Sung et al., 2004). There is scant research aimed at understanding how non-legal motivators support veterans' desire to seek treatment in problem-solving courts. In particular, there is little published data on the importance of veteran culture as a motivating factor in seeking treatment. The perception that there is a distinct veterans' culture and that treatment for veterans necessitates a separate problem-solving court (see Russell, 2009) underscores the need to examine these ideas more closely to justify their continued development and substantively contribute to their formation. This study bridges this gap in the literature by exploring veteran culture as a motivating factor for treatment seeking in a VTC.

Data and Methods

The data for this study are derived from an in-depth analysis of one VTC in central Pennsylvania. Although focusing on one VTC in one state inherently limits the generalizability of the findings, we believe that the members of the sample in this study are uniquely situated for an exploratory study about the motivation for treatment among VTC participants. First, Pennsylvania is a leader in the VTC movement as it hosts the largest number of VTCs in the U.S. with 17 VTCs situated throughout the Commonwealth. Second, Pennsylvania has the fourth largest population of veterans in the United States, with 1.03 million residents having served in the military (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015), over 20,000 veterans in the county under examination, and more than 128,000 veterans in the contiguous surrounding counties.¹ Third, the VTC in the present study has been operating since 2012, providing the VTC team with several years of experience,² while also allowing sufficient time to develop an evaluable program. Finally, the VTC examined in this study is part of a larger problem-solving court network in the county

¹ The VTCs in Pennsylvania often accept justice-involved veterans from the surrounding jurisdictions on a case-by-case basis.

² Most VTC team members have served the program since its inception in 2008.

– providing the VTC team and VTC participants a varied perspective on the role of problem-solving courts as well as multiple options for enrolling in alternative court-based treatment programs (i.e., drug court, mental health court).

We first conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with VTC team members including the judge, court coordinator, prosecuting attorney, defense attorney, probation officers, and mental health treatment coordinator to gather detailed information on team members' perceptions of VTC participants' motivation for treatment. Next, we held one-on-one interviews with VTC clients and VTC mentors to provide client and collateral views of motivation for treatment within the VTC context. Finally, a focus group with clients was held to provide participants a chance to discuss their views in a joint session. The semi-structured interview guide and focus group prompts were developed by the lead author and were based on observations of the VTC hearings and team meetings, telephone interviews with the 17 VTCs operating in Pennsylvania (see Ahlin et al., 2015), as well as prior evaluations of drug courts (see Ahlin et al., 2011). Each interview lasted about 1.5 h and was conducted by a co-Principal Investigator of the study, and the focus group co-facilitated by the authors was two hours. Data were collected between April 2014 and March 2015 and the study was approved by the Pennsylvania State University IRB.

After the data were transcribed, we conducted a content analysis of the open-ended responses using thematic analysis guided by principles of iterative emergent coding (Silverman, 1993). This approach involves comparing concepts and finding similarities and differences between them (Glaser, 1992), while also identifying themes that recur across data sources. The results examined here represent key themes and concepts derived from the analysis.

Results

The majority of participants were male and White (Table 1). These demographics are consistent with the population of the VTC. The VTC team is comprised primarily of males (60 %), and all team members are White.

Five main themes related to justice-involved veterans' motivation to seek treatment in the VTC program emerged from the iterative coding process. Notably, the themes reflect that the veterans in this study voluntarily (and seemingly subconsciously) translated their enforced military socialization into a model for living their lives

Table 1 Study Participants

	VTC team interviews N = 10	Participant interviews N = 12	Focus group N = 7
<i>Sex</i>			
Male	6	12	6
Female	4	0	1
<i>Race</i>			
African American	0	4	2
White	10	8	5

generally, both within and outside the VTC. Thematic codes include: (1) all veterans, regardless of whether they are in the VTC as clients, mentors, or team members, experienced a particular form of social norming through their military training that created commonalities of experience and expectations among them; (2) the VTC capitalizes on successes experienced by veterans during their military service, prior to becoming involved in the justice system; (3) part of the social norming that occurred in the military, and survives to the present, is a sense that the veterans are a part of something larger than themselves to which they are beholden and responsible; (4) the sense of having a larger, institutional obligation creates resentment or bitterness at times, particularly when veterans doubt the integrity of the mission, namely treatment; and (5) the commonality of the socialization experience creates a unique bond among the veterans on an individual level that creates an overarching desire to promote one another's success. We examine each of these themes in-depth to gain an understanding of how military socialization to the veteran culture works as a motivator among veterans enrolled in a VTC.

Becoming “one of Them”

We begin with the overarching theme of veteran culture and a sense amongst the group that their traits and circumstances are unparalleled in the criminal justice system, supporting the need for a separate problem-solving court. During all interviews and the focus group we asked respondents for their thoughts on what makes veterans' treatment court different from other specialty courts. Strikingly, there is a sense among all of the VTC stakeholders, veterans and non-veterans alike, that prior military service distinguishes veterans as members of a subculture. The almost universal response from VTC participants included a slight smile and an initial comment to the effect of “we are different.” For veteran clients in the VTC, the veteran culture entails pride in their identity, but shame in the behavior that brought them to the VTC.

This idea that veterans are unique compared to other cases brought before the court is shared by the VTC team, particularly the judge; a veteran who was a champion behind the establishment of this VTC. The VTC team readily acknowledged that they use the military subculture to the benefit of the VTC. They intentionally incorporate certain references to military life into courtroom procedures. The VTC team capitalized on the shared military experiences of participants, integrating references to prior service into all aspects of the VTC courtroom experience. Over the course of six weeks of courtroom observations totaling 15 h, we observed that the judge, the district attorney, the probation officer, and all of the mentors made direct and indirect references to military life and culture. The judge advised new clients that “this [the VTC] is not for everyone; it is a huge undertaking and you have to make a commitment if you want to join us,” which sounds much like “maybe you can be one of us” or “looking for a few good men,”—two military recruitment slogans from years past. Drawing on the military culture which promotes team work, he told another new client to “look around; we are all here for you. You are not alone anymore.”

Among the VTC team, three members had prior military service. Though employing veterans on the VTC team is not a key component of the court, it does have its advantages to facilitate interactions and benefit from the shared experience. One team

member who did not serve in the armed forces acknowledged that the military “is a different world” and described problems he had “interpreting what [clients] mean” sometimes. He said that they “spoke a different language,” meaning that they used military jargon and phrases that are familiar to veterans but not necessarily civilians. For example, if a participant reported that they were “good to go,” that meant that he or she was complying fully with the treatment plan (i.e., the mission) and appeared to be self-sufficient. This particular team member worked to bridge the language barrier, though a discord in culture between civilians and veterans presented itself through a lack of common language.

The veteran culture identified as a unifying concept by respondents is the homogeneity upon which VTCs are premised and structured (Russell, 2009). This culture, developed through military socialization (e.g., shared experiences, language, mores), is a way to organize the VTC as a joint experience. It is these common core elements that serve as the foundation upon which the other themes emerged and serve to demonstrate participants’ motivation for seeking treatment in a VTC.

A “Baseline for Success”

Stemming from the concept of culture, prior success was a recurrent theme in the data. Perhaps one of the mentors explained it best when he stated: “This program capitalizes on a poorly understood common denominator [veteran subculture] that is extremely useful. It provides a point for departure to help these vets get their lives back together.” Or, as described more bluntly by a VTC team member, “being a veteran means they did something right before, and they have a bare bones understanding of how to behave.” Being a veteran demonstrates to the court and to the offender themselves that they were successful in another arena, at another point in time. In order to join the military, an individual must have a respectable personal history. Although truthful stories persist about people who joined the military to avoid criminal sanctions, the reality of the present force is that the military demands a certain degree of decency among its recruits. The VTC team appears to depend upon this metaphorical pre-screening of individuals to assume that the veterans before them in the VTC hail from a certain background, or “are not total dirt bags,” as one veteran/VTC team member explained. It appears from the myriad comments received on this topic that prior military service creates a common shared baseline of experience and qualifications amongst participants.

The focus on prior success in the military is notably evident during courtroom proceedings. For example, on one Marine’s six month anniversary of sobriety, the judge congratulated him and said “becoming a Marine was not easy. Becoming a good man by completing this program is not easy, either. But you became a Marine, and you can do this.” Clients and mentors in the courtroom universally muttered agreement and one announced “that’s right.” When another Marine “slipped up” and got drunk, the judge admonished him by saying “I do not know what Marine Corps jargon is for “screwed up,” but no more, you understand? No more.” Then, in an apparent effort to lighten the mood, the judge said “you are lucky I do not put you in the brig” (the military jail) and laughed. Many others in the courtroom chuckled. These exchanges reinforced the expectations of the program, while also reminding the participants that the judge and other VTC team members knew they could succeed.

The VTC provides structure similar to the military where participants are required to abide by the rules set forth by the VTC team and generally are not permitted to substantially deviate from the prescribed formula. While this framework exists for all problem-solving courts, veterans may be particularly adept at meeting the demands and requirements of the program. First, because of their military training, they are already familiar with the hierarchical nature of the problem-solving court model because it was also part of the military environment. Second, they are comfortable with rules and regulations because they have experienced a strict environment before. One focus group participant explained that VTC “gave me my structure back,” while others in the session appreciated the accountability VTC reinstated in their post-military life. Veterans have a familiarity with, and to some extent have demonstrated an ability to succeed in, a structured environment.

VTC participants also had a sense of self-efficacy that became evident through their service and prior accomplishments in the military. They were trained to rely on themselves and their brothers and sisters in uniform, and demonstrated how their military training is being applied within the structure of the VTC. By building on past accomplishments, several veterans voiced a belief that they can tackle one more battle, their involvement with the justice system, with the right support. One particularly poignant sentiment was expressed: “We know how to keep our nose clean. It’s just we forgot for a little while.” Another participant recounted an interaction he had with the VTC Judge: “Yea, I told the judge that I got straight A’s on my midterms and he was like ‘of course you did, congratulations,’ and I was like ‘that’s just how I do it, you know?’” I mean, I was like that when I was in [the military]. I got sh*t done, you know?” The expectations to do well and support offered by the VTC judge are in accord with the processes of other problem-solving courts. However, it is the recognition by the veterans themselves that they were once successful and could be that way again that emerged as a consistent factor in how the VTC serves to help veterans reclaim their prosocial identities, restore their self-reliance, and motivate their participation in the VTC.

Institutional and Societal Obligation to Succeed

The warrior ethos (Gray, 1998), colloquially expressed as the general military motto “leave no one behind”, is carried over into civilian life and was evident amongst the participants. In this group, seeking recovery was not always a self-centered pursuit or solely about reducing criminal charges, though they remained very salient goals. Several veterans also expressed a desire to get treatment so that they could help others. In general, the veterans participating in the focus group agreed, as evidenced by nodding their heads, when one participant stated: “We are all in this together, you know?” Others reiterated this thought with similar statements, such as “we are a community here;” “you walk in here alone, but you walk out together” (several said this as if it were the VTC mantra); and “we have each other’s backs”. One veteran also suggested during the focus group that participants who have been in the VTC for some time “lock on to [new veterans] to bring each other up through [the VTC program] phases,” just as they would bring their military comrades up through the military ranks. This joint sense of ownership over treatment as an institutional and societal obligation

to “do treatment” was mentioned in several ways, though the premise was the same: VTC is not just about getting treatment for them; VTC is also about getting better for other service members.

During a joint interview with two VTC participants, a seasoned VTC participant verbalized to a new participant: “You are going to reach so many people now. You are going to make such an impact.” This statement served as a way to motivate the new veteran as he entered VTC, while also setting expectations for giving back to the group and making recovery about more than him; just as the military trains its members as a team. The idea that VTC impacts participants as a group, not individually, is congruent with the military culture and the warrior ethos mentioned at the outset of this section. Though recovery and progress in treatment is still a very individual process, going through the VTC with the support of a group of people who have a similar background is a unique component of this particular problem-solving court and seems to instill a sense of obligation to do well in treatment. All participants in problem-solving courts share similar experiences, though these commonalities generally are not positive occurrences and include drug addiction, mental health needs, and criminal charges. Veterans enrolled in VTCs also have these negative shared experiences, though often conversations between participants and with their mentors highlight the positive shared military experiences that seem to help them assist each other in the VTC process. Overall, the sense among clients and mentors is that a failure in the program is a failure to the community they have built within the VTC. Although one person’s treatment success does not depend on another client’s sobriety, the culture within the VTC implies a collective purpose or mission.

Overall, the primary motivator among these veterans appears to be their desire to redeem themselves in the eyes of their peers, their mentors, and themselves. They want to reclaim the honor and respect they associate with their veteran status. But most important to all of them, they want to self-identify as a veteran, not as a criminal, a victim, or an addict. They want to renew their military identity and replace the stigma of their offense.

Questioning the Institution, not the Individual

Interestingly, many conversations throughout this study digressed to discussions about the military as an institution. At first, these discussions seemed to be nostalgic, or cathartic, for the veterans. But then it became apparent through the iterative review and coding process that many veterans unwittingly drew parallels between their disdain for poorly defined missions in the military and frustration with what they perceive to be arbitrary or unfair VTC policies and practices. Moreover, veteran clients seemed to derive pride and esprit de corps among their fellow veterans by bonding over their frustrations with “the brass” during their days in the service and the “court” in the present circumstances.

For context, over half of veteran clients recalled that, at times, they did not understand the purpose of military missions to which they were assigned. Many of them felt that there “was no plan;” they were in a foreign country “killing so [they] did not get killed” without a justifiable mission or policy for that killing. This sense of purposelessness made them angry and resentful. They followed the orders, and they

suppressed bitterness and disillusionment with the leaders who required them to follow orders and accomplish missions. As one particularly angry young veteran, who recently returned from a field of conflict explained, “I hate those mf’ers, you know. I hate those... at the top who tell us what to do, where to go, they have no f’ing clue, man, about what we got to do. And they think we gonna believe this is some big important mission and we are gonna make America safe and all this sh*t... we are there shooting mf’ers so they do not shoot us. That’s it.” Several other veteran clients who were listening laughed nervously as this young man stopped speaking, then one joked “so he is working on his anger issues.” But further probing revealed that many veteran clients shared the same frustrations, in perhaps less colorful language. The consensus among these veterans was that the military generals in charge do not know what really happens among the lower ranks, particularly lower enlisted ranks.³

Similarly, and almost seamlessly, this group transitioned to talking about the VTC team and that many of them “just do not get it;” even those team members who were veterans. When asked to explain what “it” was, none of the veteran clients in this group or subsequent groups could pinpoint precisely what the VTC team did not understand about the clients. Yet the majority claimed to feel either misunderstood or mismanaged by certain members of the VTC team. This suggests that while the military culture is strong, there is also another culture, perhaps one of addict or offender, which prohibits a complete understanding between the VTC team and the participants.

Despite this friction, the judge emerged as somewhat of a common hero among the respondents, and several equated him to “the boss” or “the OIC” meaning the officer in charge. Respondents seemed reluctant to question the mandates of those in close social proximity to them, those who they interacted with more closely such as the judge or the VTC team manager. They also commonly seemed extremely willing to question the integrity or motivations of those farther removed from them, such as persons involved in probation and supervision. They thought “the program” (the requirements of VTC participation) was inconsistent at times and that “they [some team members] have no idea what is going on with us.” That nebulous “they” sound strikingly like the “they” who ran the military as discussed in other conversations. It appeared that animosity towards the “higher ups” united these clients during their military service and within the VTC. It is not clear if this similarity or shared experience would emerge in other problem-solving court settings, though it did serve as a way for participants to bond and make sense of the parallels between the military and VTC.

Brothers- and Sisters-in-Arms: Bonds Among Individuals

As described above, veterans were quick to criticize institutions, whether it was the military or the VTC. Yet none of them blamed any single military member or VTC team member for the perceived lack of a defined mission. When discussing the military as an organization, the clients appeared uncomfortable, fidgety, or agitated. But when they were asked about their “brothers-in-arms” (one male client corrected us and added “sisters”), many of them smiled openly and all of them appeared more relaxed. They talked freely about the bonds they felt with the people with whom they served and went

³ All of the veteran clients during this particular interview were prior enlisted service members.

to battle, and for their fellow VTC participants. In terms of their military comrades, they would “die for those guys;” they felt an incredible, abiding bond with their fellow military personnel. That fealty translated directly into the VTC experience. During this conversation about their military experiences, without prompting, one client exclaimed “it’s just like here!” Further discussion revealed that he meant that they all “had each other’s backs” in the VTC. They were united against whatever forces had brought them into the VTC, and they felt the same kind of loyalty to one another. The bonds of military service appeared to transcend time, place, and branch of the armed services.

Similar to military socialization, the VTC process appears to indoctrinate a sense of solidarity and teamwork. During a graduation ceremony, a graduating client turned to the other clients and said “you know, they told me that I would want to do this for myself, and I did not believe them. And they told me that I would want to do this for you knuckleheads, and I did not believe them. But it’s true. Listen to them, okay? You walk in here alone; we walk out of here together.” Much applause followed as a demonstration of support for the graduate and his message. This notion that veterans may disagree with the military mission, while remaining steadfast supporters of the bond between veterans, is similar to how they view their relationship with the VTC and other participants. The mission of the VTC is to provide treatment to justice-involved veterans, and participants do not always agree with the requirements established for achieving this goal, though their respect for and bond with other veterans is rarely questioned. A function of their training, members of the armed services obey orders regardless of whether they agree with the actions that must be taken to accomplish the mission. Dissent could not only risk the life of that veteran, but also those lives of the other team members. In the military, the ingrained bond between their comrades is necessary to promote solidarity and team work, while also increasing the likelihood of survival for the group. Among the veterans interviewed, this bond seems to be strongest between contemporaries and weaker, if not nonexistent, between members at different levels of the military hierarchy and among civilians. Speaking about his trust issues post-deployment, one veteran stated: “They tell me I have some trust issues and I am kind of like “no sh*t.” I do not trust anybody. But ... I trust my Marines. I trust the guy next to me. But those guys up top, f*&! them.” They appear to trust other VTC participants and to trust their veteran mentors. This connection with other veterans is evident not only in their words, but also their actions. While in the VTC program, participants are required to meet one hour prior to the weekly court hearing for “fellowship,” but many of them arrive two and three hours early to visit and joke around. One veteran continues to attend these meetings and the hearings even though he graduated from the program a year ago.

Despite ideological concerns regarding the premise of military operations, veteran respondents expressed a deep commitment to their fellow service members and this bond seemingly solidified their desire to come through missions as a team; something that was reiterated in the context of VTC. As part of the VTC, the veterans believed that they could get through this particular battle (vet court), even if they questioned the mission (treatment) because they have a strong bond with other veterans in their group that serves to motivate them. The VTC participants did not always agree with the program requirements, or how the goal of treatment was to be accomplished, but as a group they expressed a sense of solidarity amongst them to at least attempt the mission.

This sense of collaboration was a motivating factor for seeking treatment through VTC and, during the focus group, the veteran participants expressed a keen desire to enroll in the VTC over the community drug court available in the county. When the group was probed to elaborate why they preferred VTC over drug court, the sole female participant stated “I have my vets”. Other comments included “What I had in the military I have here” and “[It is] easier to make friends here, the first couple of days you do not know people, but then you open up...interact with each other.” The general sentiment during this part of the focus group conversation seemed to revolve around the idea that the participants recreated some of the good parts of the military, like comradery, looking out for one another, and going through tough times together, within the structure of the VTC. The participants valued the ability to go through a program like the VTC with people who understood them and their needs as veterans. This appeared to be true more so for the veterans who had served during more recent conflicts. Several revealed that upon returning from combat operations or long deployments that they stayed to themselves; one stated “It’s hard coming back [from the military].” Others expanded on this idea offering comments such as “[We] get used to trusting people in the military”, suggesting that this was not also true in civilian life, though the lack of trust is assuaged in the confines of the VTC.

Conclusions

A variety of problem-solving courts exist to segregate offenders based on a common need or similar background. Veteran culture and shared experiences are what primarily distinguish the VTC from other problem-solving courts. Additional research is needed to determine if VTCs have outcomes at least as positive as other problem-solving courts (see Holbrook & Anderson, 2011; Slattery et al., 2013), though the relevance of a veteran culture to motivate participation in a VTC is clearly supported by the current findings. In sum, the data from this study suggest that, generally speaking, veterans’ socialization into the military culture supports their efforts to seek treatment and remain in the VTC. The familiar structure and expectations for accountability in the VTC are similar to those encountered during their military service provide participants with framework upon which they can attempt to rebuild their lives, and seek treatment to attain success once more. While structure and accountability are components of any problem-solving court, the results of this study strengthens the idea that the military culture is an integral piece of the VTC treatment process, though further studies regarding the role of veteran culture in VTCs is worthwhile.

Whilst this study did not confirm that veterans are more amenable to treatment, it did offer some insight into the potential that prior successes (e.g., military achievements) could be a catalyst for success in the VTC. The norm in other problem-solving courts is not one of success interrupted by a bad choice, or string of bad choices. Clients in other problem-solving courts often have a history of criminal offending and drug use, and may not have experienced any prior successes – due to structural barriers or cumulative disadvantages. In the current study it was not possible to determine whether veterans’ prior successes were a clear motivating factor to the participants, though it did emerge as a latent incentive. It would be interesting to compare experiences of

individuals in various problem-solving courts to determine if a history of being successful at something is a universal motivator across court types.

Relatedly, the relevance of self-efficacy (see Bahr et al., 2010) and other internal motivations (see Evans et al., 2009; Hiller et al., 2002) among veterans in VTCs requires additional inquiry as it may be useful when assessing outcomes among participants. While this theme was apparent in the personal one-on-one interviews with VTC participants and VTC mentors, it did not emerge in the focus group setting. It could be that veterans were not comfortable sharing this type of positive image of themselves in a group setting; or perhaps it did not materialize because the discussion in the focus group did not frequently extend beyond ideas about the VTC as a group or social entity because the focus group prompts were less individual-oriented than the semi-structured interview questions.

Another interesting area that emerged was the idea of trust. Trust between veterans was strong, though it was lacking with outsiders. This serves to contextualize how treatment is approached in the VTC. This VTC requires individual and group treatment, as well as attendance at NA/AA meetings, similar to other problem-solving courts. One issue with this required treatment activity concerns engaging in treatment programming with nonveterans; one focus group participant was particularly apprehensive about attending AA/NA meetings with nonveterans. Because many of the veterans in our study expressed trust issues with civilians, and may also experience mental health concerns such as post-traumatic stress or anxiety, veterans may find it difficult to approach other meeting attendees, for small talk or to seek a sponsor, and may not be comfortable sharing their stories at NA/AA meetings – an important component of the AA treatment model. This study identifies veteran culture as important in a treatment setting, and illuminates the issue of cultural competence for veterans' treatment plans. It is recommended that further research be undertaken to examine the potential benefits of veteran-only group treatment and self-help groups to support VTCs in adhering to the cultural needs of justice-involved veterans.

Although the current study is based on a small sample of participants, the findings suggest that military culture is an overlooked key component of the VTC – both how it operates and as a motivator for treatment. Being limited to one jurisdiction in Pennsylvania, this study lacks wide scale generalizability, though it provides a thick descriptive examination of how veterans in this VTC are motivated to engage in a problem-solving court that caters to their needs as veterans. Due to the rapid proliferation of specialized treatment courts, continued efforts are needed to understand the differences between problem-solving courts, how they operate, and how they uniquely address the needs of their specific populations.

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